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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIJING 022633

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [CH](#)
SUBJECT: CHINA'S LOCAL CONGRESS ELECTIONS: REFORMERS
LOOKING FOR SMALL PROGRESS, SEEK SUPPORT

REF: BEIJING 17493

Classified By: Political Internal Unit Chief Susan Thornton.
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) The elections for local people's congresses currently being held across China are being closely watched by reformers who hope that real independent candidates might run some successful campaigns and become members of what have traditionally been seen as rubber-stamp bodies. The congresses hold potential for bringing change because of the formal power they have to make policy and appoint government leaders, elections activist Li Fan (strictly protect) recently told poloff. The Chinese Government, however, views independent candidates as a threat to stability and the Party's primacy and therefore "rigs" the races. Li suggested that outside pressure might help to improve the quality of the elections, which are scheduled to run through the end of 2007. The upcoming November 8 election in Beijing is one of the more important races, Li said, because independent candidates have been elected in Beijing previously and the races here will be more closely scrutinized. Comment: The election of even dozens of independent candidates would do little to expand the real power of local congresses absent systemic change. Nevertheless, increased pressure, interest and publicity surrounding these elections will raise consciousness in some quarters about rights, participation and accountability of government. End Summary and Comment.

Importance of Local People's Congress Elections

2. (C) Elections activist Li Fan (strictly protect), a U.S. Embassy small grants recipient and Director of The World and China Institute, recently explained to poloff the importance of China's ongoing nationwide elections for local people's congresses (China's local legislatures). These elections, he argued, give Chinese citizens influence, albeit indirect, over the composition of the Government. Representatives directly elected by the public to local people's congresses have the power to choose delegates for congresses at the higher levels, namely the Prefectural/City, Provincial and National People's Congresses. The formal powers of these congresses are significant, as they have the authority not only to pass legislation but also to select government leaders at each corresponding level (local, prefectural, and national). Li admitted that, in reality, the power of people's congresses is seriously circumscribed and that it is the Communist Party that selects leaders and sets policy at every level. Nevertheless, the election of "real" independent candidates could, in the long run, lead to real political reform, Li asserted.

Scope, Timing

13. (C) Li explained the scope and timing of these elections, which are being held for local people's congresses at the county and township levels in rural areas, and at the municipal district level in urban areas. (Note: separate materials provided by an American NGO indicate that elections will be held in 35,400 towns and 2,500 counties in both urban and rural areas across China. End note.) The elections began in July 2006 and are being held on a running basis through the end of 2007. Elections have already been held in Wuhan (September 26) and Shenzhen (September 28). Upcoming significant races include Beijing (November 8), Shanghai (December 12), and Zhejiang (end of December).

Elections Background: Rise of Independents in 2003

14. (C) China began to hold elections for local people's congresses in the 1980s, but they became important only after 2003, Li said, when "ordinary" people, including lawyers, professors and others, began to run seriously as independent candidates. (Note: the elections for local people's congresses are completely separate from elections for village committees and heads, which also began in the 1980s. End note.) In the most recent local people's congress elections in 2003, approximately 50 independent candidates ran for office, with about 20 winning, all in Beijing. Most were elected to the 300-member people's congress for the Haidian District, which contains two to three million people and is home to many of Beijing's major universities. Among these 20 victorious independents, two were selected to be representatives to the next higher-level people's congress representing Beijing City, which has approximately 400

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members.

15. (C) In the upcoming November 8 elections in Beijing, perhaps as many as 80 independent candidates will run, though precise numbers won't be known until right before the election, Li said. Independents are likely to again be concentrated in the Haidian university district, where they have a better chance of winning. Li did not have figures for how many residents would be eligible to vote in Beijing, but he provided an example from the recent election in Shenzhen to illustrate government efforts to keep the number of voters down. In Shenzhen, one district had 60,000 residents who were eligible to vote, but only 600 were "registered," and in the end, only about 200 actually voted, Li claimed.

Rigging Elections, Harassing Independents

16. (C) The government recognizes the threat that independent candidates could pose to the Communist Party's monopoly on power and therefore has begun "harassing" them and "rigging" the elections, Li stated. The government fears that people's "democratic consciousness" is rising and that greater numbers of people are attempting to use Chinese law and the Constitution to assert their rights. To justify its tactics, the Government claims independents' true intentions are to foment social instability and challenge the Party's primacy, or that "foreign enemy forces" are involved. The Central Government has likely issued orders to stop independent candidates at all costs, Li surmised. (Note: See reftel for comments of another activist, Yao Lifan, on specific examples of harassment of those supporting independent candidates in these elections. End note.)

17. (C) Describing the current climate for independent candidates as "very bad," Li claimed that the elections in Wuhan and Shenzhen last month were "completely rigged" and that local officials went so far as to arrest independent candidates. By contrast, in 2003, the situation was better, at least in Beijing. At that time, independent candidates

were strongly pressured not to run, but the races in Beijing at least weren't completely fixed. Nevertheless, in more remote areas, Li asserted, local officials then, as now, "can do whatever they want."

Role of Outside Pressure

¶18. (C) Li judged that selective outside pressure could help in the conduct of fairer elections. The Chinese government has already "promised" the international community that it would "expand" democracy, Li stated, so going back on that pledge would cause the government to "lose face." The Beijing races are important, he asserted, because if the precedent of holding fair elections can be established in Beijing, the chances of them being held elsewhere across China will increase significantly. Nevertheless, foreign observation of local people's congress elections would be something new, and therefore could be difficult, Li stated. Foreign organizations have observed village elections in the past and Li claimed that one American NGO had once been able to observe a local people's congress election, but that was not a "real" race, he said.

"Demanding More Democracy in China"

¶19. (C) "Many people are now demanding more democracy in China," Li declared. Citing Taiwan as an example, Li said that 40 years ago, activists there used elections to take the first steps at establishing an organized opposition. In the end, that opposition toppled the ruling KMT. Today, in Taiwan, it is possible to challenge the President and even attempt to recall him. In the PRC, Li noted, it is not even possible to recall a bureaucrat, let alone the President. Nevertheless, Li passionately argued, the possibility of reform in China still exists, again stating that, over time, "real" independent candidates could bring about reform in China. Li noted that once elected, independent people's congress delegates would be "protected," because deputies enjoy "certain immunities."

¶10. (C) Examples of progress at the local level are a reason for hope, Li said, citing the case of Wenling City in Zhejiang Province. In Wenling, a township leader there has agreed to run a "real, free election," with "only 15 percent" of the seats guaranteed for Party/Government candidates. Li said he and his activist allies had first worked with this local leader on budget reform, later encouraging him to expand his reformist efforts to other areas. Now, this leader has agreed to hold relatively free elections. "This

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is how reform must be done in China," Li declared, "from the top down." Another positive example, Li said, is Honghe City in Yunnan, where local government leaders are "very open." For example, the local people's congress leader there defended construction of a large public square in the city by saying that residents require a place to demonstrate in order to eventually make China a democracy. Despite the positive example set by Wenling, Li warned that the situation is "extremely sensitive," and that any publicity or outside involvement in events there would be "most unhelpful." While Li hopes for outside pressure to assure improved local people's congress elections in some large cities, he cautioned that his comments about Wenling should be kept strictly confidential.

Comment

¶11. (C) While activists are focused on the possibility of using legally sanctioned popular local congress elections to push forward democratic reform, the election of even dozens of independent candidates would do little to expand the real power of local congresses absent systemic change.

Nevertheless, increased pressure, interest and publicity surrounding these elections will raise consciousness in some quarters about rights, participation and accountability of government.

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